

Seasonal Flu and You

Harford County Health Department



What is the flu?

The flu (influenza) is an infection of the nose, throat, and lungs that is caused by the influenza virus. The flu can spread person to person. Most people with the flu are sick for a week, but then feel better. However, some people (especially young children, pregnant women, older people, and people with chronic health problems) can get very sick and some can die.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Most people with the flu feel tired and have fever (usually high), headache, dry cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and sore muscles. Some people, especially children, may also have stomach problems and diarrhea. Cough can last two or more weeks.

Is the “stomach flu” really the flu?

No. Many people use the term “stomach flu” to describe illnesses with nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. These symptoms can be caused by many different viruses, bacteria, or even parasites. While vomiting, diarrhea, and being nauseous or “sick to your stomach” can sometimes be related to the flu – more commonly in children than adults – these problems are rarely the main symptoms of influenza. The flu is a respiratory disease and not a stomach or intestinal disease.



What is the difference between a cold and the flu?

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. Generally, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations.

When is the flu season in the United States?

In the United States, the peak of flu season has occurred anywhere from late November through March.

How does flu spread?

Flu is spread from person to person through the respiratory droplets of coughs and sneezes. This can happen when droplets from a cough or sneeze of an infected person are propelled (generally up to 3 feet) through the air and deposited on the mouth or nose of people nearby. Though much less frequent, the viruses also can be spread when a person touches respiratory droplets on another person or an object and then touches their own mouth or nose before washing their hands.

How long can a sick person spread the flu to others?

Healthy adults may be able to spread the flu from 1 day **before** getting sick to up to 5 days **after** getting sick. This can be longer in children and in people who don't fight disease as well (people with weakened immune systems).

How soon will I get sick if I am exposed to the flu?

The time from when a person is exposed to flu virus to when symptoms begin is about one to four days, with an average of about two days.

Are there medicines to treat seasonal flu?

There are antiviral drugs that can be used to treat the flu or prevent infection with flu viruses. These antiviral drugs must be prescribed by a doctor. For treatment of the flu, antiviral drugs should be started within 2 days after becoming sick. When used this way, these drugs can reduce flu symptoms and shorten the time you are sick by 1-2 days. Your doctor can discuss with you if these drugs are right for you.

What should I do to keep from getting the flu?

A flu vaccine is the best way to protect against the flu. The CDC recommends anyone older than 6 months receive annual flu vaccination. Those at high risk of having serious flu complications or people who live with or care for those at high risk for serious complications should especially be vaccinated annually. These include:

- ◆ Children 6 months to 19 years
- ◆ Pregnant Women
- ◆ People 50 years and older
- ◆ People of any age with certain medical conditions
- ◆ People who live in nursing homes and other long term care facilities
- ◆ People who live with or care for those at high risk for complications to the flu, including health care workers, household contacts of persons at high risk for complications from the flu, and household contacts and out of home caregivers of children less than 6 months of age (these children are too young to be vaccinated)



Will the seasonal flu vaccine protect against the H1N1 flu?

Seasonal flu vaccine will **not** protect against the H1N1 (swine flu) virus but is protective against the seasonal flu virus.

What should I do if I get sick?

If you become ill with influenza-like symptoms, including fever, body aches, runny nose, sore throat, nausea, or vomiting or diarrhea, you may want to contact your health care provider, particularly if you are worried about your symptoms. Your health care provider will determine whether influenza testing or treatment is needed.

If you become ill and experience any of the following warning signs, seek emergency medical care.

In children, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Not waking up or not interacting
- Being so irritable that the child does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough

In adults, emergency warning signs that need urgent medical attention include:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Sudden dizziness
- Confusion
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Flu-like symptoms improve but then return with fever and worse cough



For more up-to-date information, please check the Harford County Health Department website at www.harfordcountyhealth.com or the CDC website at www.cdc.gov/flu.